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The Guardian of Wednesday 5th March 2025 reported that: “Donald Trump has threatened to halt all federal funding for any college or school that “allows illegal protests” and vowed to imprison “agitators”, prompting alarm from free expression groups. “All Federal Funding will STOP for any College, School, or University that allows illegal protests”, the US president wrote on Truth Social yesterday.... the threat came just a day after his administration announced it would review and could pull more than \$50m in government contracts from Columbia University over the school’s “ongoing inaction in the face of relentless harassment of Jewish students”. On Monday the government said it would review more than \$5bn in grant commitments to Columbia to “ensure the university is in compliance with federal regulations, including its civil rights responsibilities”. Monday’s announcement was made by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, and the US general services administration. The health and human service secretary, Robert F Kennedy Jr, said in the accompanying news release that “anti-Semitism – like racism – is a spiritual and moral malady that sickens societies and kills people with lethalities comparable to history’s most deadly plagues.”

This is all part of the Shock and Awe strategy of Trumpism. The Shock effect is real enough: the idea is to upend all previous conventions and assumptions underpinning the conduct of an acceptable social system. How long we will remain in awe of Trump’s cavalier bravado is another matter: after Hubris comes Nemesis. More importantly, Trump’s election reflects public opinion in the USA and the assault on universities had already begun under a Democratic Presidency. As a consequence of their lame and ill-judged responses to bullying and provocation

Shock and Awe

in Congressional hearings eighteen months ago, when pressed to explain how they were handling antisemitism on their respective campuses in the wake of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, three presidents of leading universities resigned forthwith¹. As the BBC reported at the time: “During a tense congressional hearing last month, Dr Gay [the President of Harvard] said calls for the killing of Jews were abhorrent. She added, however, that it would depend

on the context whether such comments would constitute a violation of Harvard’s code of conduct regarding bullying and harassment.” As she put it: “The rules around bullying and harassment are quite specific and if the context in which that language is used amounts to bullying and harassment, then we take – we take action against it.” As pro-Palestinian protests intensified the President of Columbia later fell over the same issue². There has been no concerted push back by the academic community. Trump is now accelerating matters on to their logical conclusion. And when the US sneezes, the world – and especially the UK – catches a cold.

In Oxford pro-Palestinian protests were prominent last summer. Encampments ran throughout Trinity Term³. Eventually these were forcibly shut down through legal injunctions. Since then there has been a series of increasingly violent, dangerous and damaging attacks on University facilities. Given the many historical precedents this could have been predicted: in the face of inaction or suppression by the authorities the tendency is for any initially peaceful – and often joyful – mass protest movement to splinter and become more extreme. As the *Guardian* of 8th March reported: “Five years ago, activists from Extinction Rebellion and the school strikes movement believed getting huge numbers of people on the streets could persuade the powerful to change

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...and much more

course.... Now some activists have begun to escalate the campaign, carrying out acts of sabotage against the corporations they see as responsible for the destruction of the climate.... new laws further criminalising disruptive protests had made traditional, accountable methods of activism increasingly unsustainable, and a clandestine approach increasingly attractive”

* * *

The convention-wrecking extremism that Trump is putting in place on behalf of sections of American society not only parallels the increasing extremism shown by protest movements in the UK, but sets a disastrous precedent for a new mode of conduct of political and social affairs in general. How is this going to make possible the necessary global responses to the complex – and even existential – problems facing us, including climate change, AI, wealth inequality and new epidemics? Traditional election cycles and apposed political party structures seem no longer to be up to the job. At a time when societal values and priorities are changing so very rapidly their implementation by the police or the courts is always going to be out of

date. How then to establish consensus amidst growing extremism?

Oxford is in a good position to look for answers. In this university we have a wealth of experts and institutes researching the options for the future. And yet the University’s response to the pro-Palestinian protests was not ideal. Wellington Square issued carefully phrased statements in support of the right to protest in the name of free speech, but action – the shutting down of the encampments – speaks louder than words. It can be argued that this in itself made more extreme forms of protest more likely. In retrospect it might have been better to address the legitimate and pressing concerns of the protesters in a way that befits a university setting: for example, by inviting and mediating an ongoing series of debates to provide for the voicing of contrasting viewpoints, conducted always under the accepted standards of the considerate and considered forms of debate we are used to in academic life.

T.J.H

¹ *Oxford Magazine* No 460, 0th Week, HT 2024

² *Oxford Magazine* No 465, 2nd Week, TT 2024

³ *Oxford Magazine* No 469, 2nd Week, MT 2024

In the editorial in the previous issue of the magazine it should have been made clear that the case of the anonymous Congregation member under discussion was potentially being referred to a Redundancy Panel as distinct from a SERP charged with considering a disciplinary case. In both cases the Panels are constituted in the same way, as described in the editorial – ed

How to initiate Congregation actions

How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22nd day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8th day before the meeting.

Questions and replies

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18th day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

Postal votes

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present (“on the floor”) at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6th day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

Flysheets

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>

Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.

The Congregation website is at: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk).

In Defense of Diversity

ROBERT SCOTT

The recent culling of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) programs by President Trump's new government on campuses and in corporations scores political points but goes too far. We should not lose sight of the goal by making very clear what is in danger of being lost. The issue is fairness.

The philosophical basis for respecting diversity is that it is the ethical or fair thing to do. It is ethical to honour individual differences and treat people fairly. Beyond ethics, it is the law. There are federal, state, and local laws which prohibit discrimination.

Beyond the law, though, there are pragmatic reasons for fostering diversity. It makes good sense to cast a wide net in searching for talent, especially when we look at population trends. If we don't look widely and consider diverse populations, we will limit the capabilities of our organizations. After all, which is more important: preserving a traditional view of who can contribute to achieving goals or succeeding at accomplishing those goals?

Wise employers employ a "futures" perspective. They know that a good record in managing diversity now, in recruitment, retention, and advancement, will give them a competitive advantage in recruiting from among an increasingly diverse society in the future. They know that individual and group success requires teamwork, and that teamwork requires respect for others. In addition, these employers want managers who are attuned to the increasing diversity of customers.

In years past, families of means sponsored their children to study in other countries, travel widely, and become familiar with cultures other than their own. Why? Because it is valuable to have experiences beyond the local. Today, just as we think a much larger proportion of youth should attend college, we believe that all students should experience a variety of cultures, whether or not they come from families of wealth.

College graduates, no matter what their ethnic or national heritage, will live in communities and work in enterprises influenced by international and inter-cultural endeavours. They will be neighbours of, supervise, or be supervised by persons of a different ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, religion, physical ability, or socioeconomic background. Therefore, it makes sense that the aim should be for colleges to create diverse communities of students, faculty, and staff and avoid the echo cham-

ber effect of homogeneity. The high schools and towns from which institutions recruit students do not provide this diversity; colleges must shape it, because experience with diversity promotes learning.

For all these reasons, institutions should respect diversity as a goal. By this, I mean not only seeking "representation" but also fostering an environment in which diversity in all its dimensions is respected. To do this successfully, we must acknowledge what we have in common with others as well as how we differ. Diversity is not only a means for expanding one's horizons; it is a means for exploding group stereotypes. A diverse community helps us consider individuals and their unique talents as distinct from their group affiliation.

In contrast to what some say, goals for diversity are not in conflict with aspirations for academic excellence. Most colleges attempt to compose their undergraduate enrolment by giving preference to some students because of particular talents, geographic origin, or parental affiliation, in addition to academic preparation. It is in this spirit that we seek to nurture the diversity of the student body and enhance the diversity of the faculty and staff. We do it because it matters.

On campus, we consciously try not to allow the boundaries of disciplines to limit our vision, which is to enhance the ability of students to learn and pursue truth on their own as well as in groups. Such learning encompasses history, i.e. what has come before whether in politics or technology; imagination, i.e. learning from the arts and humanities to consider events and themes from different angles; empathy, i.e., learning to show compassion as well as tolerance; and reflection, i.e., the habit of considering what we have learned and seeking its meaning.

In all dimensions of a college campus, we can help students prepare for citizenship and careers in an increasingly interdependent and multicultural world. After all, we are interdependent economically, environmentally, and culturally, if not always diplomatically.

Finally, and importantly, we must all think globally. Diversity means different things in different cultures. While we in the United States are concerned about the history of racial prejudice, we should understand it in relation to dynamics in other countries, including those with concerns about caste systems, Romany, aborigines, and 'first peoples.'

The editors invite and welcome contributions from all our readers.
The content of Oxford Magazine relies largely on what arrives spontaneously on the
editors' desk and is usually published as received.

Our contact address is: tim.horder@dpag.ox.ac.uk

Ben Bollig has stepped down as co-editor during his term as Assessor.

Us and Them

G.R.EVANS

Rachel Reeds' short but comprehensive book, *Surviving and Thriving in Higher Education Professional Services: a guide to success* (Routledge, 2025), is both an instruction manual for the 'professionals' it was written for and an illuminating account of what they do for the academics and students who benefit. However, Reeds is frank about what is sometimes described as 'trench warfare', a 'tension' between academics and 'everyone else', including differences of 'perceived status' among the staff of 'higher education providers'.

Her chapters begin with a survey of the organisation of 'UK higher education today'. Then comes a description of 'job or career' in 'professional services' followed by a chapter on how to get such a post. Chapter 4 advises the new recruit about 'making a visible impact' and Chapter 5 considers 'managing people and teams'. The widespread enthusiasm of providers for 'change' and 'innovation' prompts the discussion in Chapter 6.

Reeds defines 'Professional Services' as replacing and embracing 'terms such as administrators, non-academic staff or support staff'. In some providers there are not two but three categories, with 'professional services' sometimes described as 'academic-related' and other non-academics as 'assistant' staff. Some academics are responsible for both teaching and research but there may also be research-only staff, usually on fixed-term externally-funded contracts, which may be classified on the same side of the 'trench' as academics. The 'umbrella carriers' of 'middle management' and 'dealing with difficult things' provide matter for Chapter 7. In Chapter 8 and the conclusion there is encouragement to see the task in broader terms and to share 'knowledge' gained. Each chapter ends with suggestions for further reading under the heading 'digging deeper'.

The scope of the needs to be met is now very wide. Government-defined 'Levels' of higher education include Levels 4 and 5, placing degrees at Level 6, with post-graduate Masters at 7 and doctorates at 8. The *Higher Education and Research Act* of 2017 therefore includes what is now a considerable range of 'higher education providers' in England, traditional Universities among them, but also hundreds of 'alternative providers'. Some of these deliver higher education in partnership with other providers which have their own degree-awarding powers, relying on them to provide their students with degrees. These all need 'professional services' to support them in their primary tasks of teaching and, in many cases, also research.

Providers of higher education need two kinds of staff: to deliver education and research and others to provide support for them. That was noticed in the original drafting of the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992 s.65, 2 (b) which approved the use of (the then significant) 'block grant' public funding for:

'the provision of any facilities, and the carrying on of any other activities, by higher education institutions in their area which

the governing bodies of those institutions consider it necessary or desirable to provide or carry on for the purpose of or in connection with education or research.'

In what sense do those offering such 'services' constitute a Profession? The *Professional Qualifications Act* of 2022, awaiting consideration of amendments and royal approval, is primarily concerned with licence to practise and the arrangements for the acceptance of international qualifications. It is designed to set out a framework 'whereby professional statutory regulatory bodies (PSRBs) can determine the necessary knowledge and experience requirements to work in a regulated profession (for example nursing or architecture)'. It will permit 'different approaches to undertaking' any 'regulatory activity' so as 'to ensure professional standards'. This is not stated to include any body recognising members of the Professional Services of higher education.¹ Nor does the Government's own approved list of regulated professions.²

The modern Professional Services in higher education came into existence in a recognisable form only in the last few decades. The need for support for the work of the 'scholars' got limited recognition in the early universities. When Oxford and Cambridge formed themselves as corporations at the beginning of the thirteenth century they provided themselves with Chancellors, who had a judicial function, and Proctors (*Procuratores*) to ensure that the corporation stayed on the right side of the law. The office of Registrar (Oxford) and Registry (Cambridge) was added from the fifteenth century to keep the records of the University such as its lists and accounts. The needs to be met expanded towards the end of the nineteenth century. Oxford's Registrar had a staff of five in 1914. The Oxford and Cambridge Universities Commission which framed the Act of 1923 recommended that the Registrar's role be developed. The staff of Oxford's Registrar numbered eight in 1930 and forty in 1958. By 2016 the Registrar was manager to half the University's staff.

The multiplication of universities from the 1890s continued with a new cluster in the 1960s, each with its own body of staff supporting the academics. A grouping of University Academic Administrative Staff created in 1961 became the Conference of University Administrators (CUA) in 1993. The resulting Association of University Administrators (AUA) became the Association of Higher Education Professionals (AHEP) in 2023. CUA traced its history back to the Meeting of University Academic Administrative Staff, founded in 1961. Its golden jubilee was celebrated in 2011³ in response to the changing UK higher education sector.

The question of status was sharpened by the creation of a Leadership Foundation in Higher Education (LFHE), merged with AdvanceHE⁴ in 2018. This promises those in Professional Services 'a vital career trajectory equal to research, teaching and supporting

learning' and, notably, to 'empower leaders at all levels: from early-career professionals to senior executives'⁵ That implies that executive leadership in a provider will not necessarily lie with its academics. It may also be described as managerial.

Reading University identifies 'role profiles' of four kinds: 'academic and research'; 'professional and managerial'; support roles which are 'clerical and technical'; 'ancillary and operational support'. The 'professional and managerial' roles are at Grades 6-8. It invites potential recruits into its 'Professional Services' as offering Career Progression at the University. The routes are listed under Leadership and Management Development; 'coaching and mentoring' and 'apprenticeships'. This may open a 'visible career pathway for professional services staff' and 'also form part of succession planning within a team, department or Directorate or School where team members showing potential can be nurtured and developed'.⁶

Traditional universities tend to adopt the terminology of 'Professional Services'. Durham University, one of the oldest, details its 'Professional Services' in information for its students, telling them that they will 'have access to an extensive, helpful support network'. It lists eleven categories, with 'health and safety' specifically stated to provide 'professional' advice.⁷ York University, one of the group of universities founded during the 1960s, also lists its *Professional Services*. These are 'overseen by the Chief Financial and Operating Officer' and variously serve Technology; Estates and Facilities; Human Resources; Research and Enterprise; Planning and Risk; External Relations; student needs, etc.⁸ The post-1992 Oxford Brookes University also has its Professional Services divided into a number of sections of the University's work such as 'academic, research and estates'.⁹ Of the alternative providers which have gained 'university title' Edge Hill (2006) lists seven 'administrative staff', two 'part-time', one described as administration 'co-ordinator', one as a 'manager' and one as a 'leader'.¹⁰

Reeds' study draws on the experience of those working in a wide range of providers, but it does not include an account of the provision developed by Oxford or Cambridge. Yet the two ancient English Universities have their own centuries-long histories of creating and multiplying administrative roles. The Colleges of Oxford and Cambridge similarly distinguish their 'academic' from their other staff. For example St. John's College Oxford and Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge list more than a dozen 'departments', each with its own body of non-academic staff.¹¹

In Oxford the distinction between academics and 'professional' administrators is somewhat blurred by grading administrators alongside academics at the same levels. The *Oxford Magazine* of Fifth Week covered a current case involving a member of staff at Grade 6 in 'a professional services support role', who counted as an academic for the purpose and therefore could not be made redundant without referral to the Staff Employment Review Panel under Statute XII, Part B. s. 13.

Oxford's Registrar now acts 'as principal adviser on strategic policy to the Vice-Chancellor and to Council', to 'ensure effective co-ordination of advice from other officers to the Vice-Chancellor, Council, and other university bodies'.¹² Cambridge's Registry is 'to act as the principal administrative officer of the University, and

as the head of the University's administrative staff' and to 'keep a record of the proceedings of the University, and to attend for that purpose' all 'public proceedings of the University', acting 'as Secretary to the Council.' The record-keeping responsibility continues, including 'maintaining a register of members of the University', and 'keeping records of matriculations and class-lists, and of degrees, diplomas, and other qualifications'. The Registry must also edit the Statutes and Ordinances and the *Cambridge University Reporter*.¹³ The multiplication of the Registry's tasks now requires a body offering 'professional' services. 'There shall be under the direction of the Council administrative officers in categories determined by Special Ordinance'.¹⁴

Oxford and Cambridge each created a 'UAS' in the 1990s. Both are now engaged in 'Reimagining Professional Services'. Oxford's UAS ('University Administration and Services', also known as 'Professional Services and University Administration') is divided into sections, most of them headed by the Registrar. These are variously called 'departments', 'directorates', 'divisions', 'services' and 'offices' and may have sub-sections of their own. For example, 'People' includes Childcare; Equality and Diversity; Occupational Health; Safety; 'Organisational Development'; 'Wellbeing' and 'international Development', each with its own group of postholders. This means that between the academic and 'the traditional student support-based professional services' now fall a variety of other tasks some leading to other professional qualifications, for example from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Chartered Management Institute or in librarianship and technology.

Cambridge's UAS (Unified Administrative Service), headed by its Registry and now similarly extensive and wide-ranging, was set up in 1996 bringing together the Financial Board, the General Board, and the Registry. Its intended status and that of its proposed members proved controversial. Although it was described as 'professional', the remarks made when it was proposed in a Report included the expression of concerns that this threatened the certainty that the University was 'academic led'. This prompted a stock-taking Notice published on 20 June 2001¹⁵ to provide assurance that 'the management of the University's activities, which is already largely in the hands of academic staff, must also continue to be academic-led' and that the 'role of the administration is to support, not to manage, the delivery of high-quality teaching and research'. But it was urged that the UAS needed 'further development both in terms of resourcing and of organization'. The opportunity was taken to emphasize the 'professionalism of the service.

With the expansion of Professional Services has gone a shift from an assumption that this forms a 'Civil Service' role to its definition as 'administrative' or 'managerial'. 'Serving' of the academic community may now allow a degree of control. Reeds suggests that 'management' is a 'role' while 'leadership' is a 'concept', leaving for further consideration whether those in Professional Services should exercise the *institutional* leadership which is now offered for approval.

In Cambridge the Council has been discussing ways in which, and with whom, this might be taken forward. On 3 June 2024 its Minutes show that it 'discussed the idea of an academic leaders' programme to help with succession planning by building a strong pool of candi-

dates for leadership positions within the University'. It continued the discussion at its July meeting and agreed a plan which was published in a Notice in the *Reporter* on 31 July:

'to create up to six new paid part-time fellowships each year for emerging academic leaders at the University, sponsored by the Vice-Chancellor. Each fellow would be supported by a PVC or Head of School (as appropriate) and would be responsible for delivering agreed objectives, which could be in the form of project(s).'

'In addition to financial remuneration', the Fellows would each receive professional coaching, including attendance on the Senior Leadership Programme Level 3. Unresolved challenges have delayed the implementation of this plan so far.

1. Strengthening oversight of partnership delivery in higher education- Government consultation, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6798ecf7e0edc3fbb060641f/Strengthening_oversight_of_partnership_delivery_in_higher_education_-_government_consultation.pdf
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/professions-regulated-by-law-in-the-uk-and-their-regulators/uk-regulated-professions-and-their-regulators>
3. Giles H. Brown, 'Fifty years of professional services in HE – time now to consider new models for leadership in universities', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 15 (2011), 22 February 2011, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2010.548150#d1e122>

4. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/>
5. <https://advance-he.ac.uk/leadership/framework-leading-higher-education>
6. <https://www.reading.ac.uk/human-resources/working-life/professional-services---career-progression-at-uor>
7. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/professional-services/>
8. <https://www.york.ac.uk/about/departments/support-and-admin/>
9. <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/about-brookes/structure-and-governance/professional-services>
10. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/02/20/the-uks-longest-serving-vice-chancellor-says-the-real-challenges-are-only-now-emerging/>
11. <https://www.sid.cam.ac.uk/people/college-departments-and-staff>
12. Statute IX, 30-32.
13. Statute C, VI.
14. Statute C, VI.
15. <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2000-01/weekly/5851/5.html>

The story of Professional Services as told in this well-written and useful book is illustrated with quotations from individuals working in professional services.

The following extracts from the book convey some of its main conclusions.

Getting started...Find information... Network...Ask questions...Learn the unwritten rules... Be open-minded.

A student doesn't understand why there are gaps between service provision or why different parts of the HEI are not joined up.

Beyond the familiar figure of the academic lecturer lies a vast, often unseen, army of professionals – the lifeblood of any higher educational institution....They are the folks in IT, finance, student support, libraries, academic registry, accommodation, recruitment, and countless other teams, whose skills and expertise are as diverse and multi-faceted as their roles and responsibilities.

Academics (those doing the teaching and/or research) and professional staff (those doing the other stuff) are often presented as operating in separate bubbles. They bump into each other at intervals and things get passed between them: grades, feedback, problems, and information about students....There can be tensions that come from different priorities, expectations, perceived status, and cultures. The 'us' and 'them' polarity keeps popping up.

The voices of the professional services community are often drowned out by the weight of academic discourse....Here's the truth: this book isn't seeking academic validation. It carves out its own space, just as we, the professional services staff, do within higher education. We possess a wealth of expertise and deserve to operate and have our voices heard, both within and outside the academic space. It's time to stop being the quiet

voice in the room. We have so much to offer.

There is no average career path or route in higher education professional services....David D finished his A levels and started a band. Somehow he went from musician to Head of Operations at a large, established Russell Group university.

The multifaceted role of middle managers, distinguishing between the task-oriented nature of management and the visionary essence of leadership.

Management is a role. It is a job and a portfolio of responsibilities. It usually encompasses coordination, organisation, supervision and accountability for the creation and deployment of resources (people, services and things). It is about meeting targets, following policies, compliance and delivering on the operational tasks.

Leadership is a concept....It encompasses a strategic view. The skills of leadership – creative thinking, critical evaluation, problem-detection, communication, expectation-management skills, empowerment, and the confidence to challenge traditional ways of working – can be learnt.

Currently, there is pressure to incorporate digital skills, and entrepreneurship, and interdisciplinary approaches to enhance graduate employability. The need for flexible, accessible learning pathway beyond traditional learning (often referred to as lifelong learning) is increasingly recognised....Balancing theoretical knowledge with practical skills training is a constant challenge for HEIs. The debate revolves around enhancing vocational pathways while maintaining the core academic strengths of HEIs.

Don't underestimate the importance of adaptability and navigating existing structures. Rather than waiting for drastic reform, workarounds and improvements within the current system can sometimes be found.

Individualism: the Victorian Legacy

BERNARD RICHARDS

In my recent review of *Brian and Maggie* (*Oxford Magazine*, No. 474) I said that there needed to be an essay on individualism. Here it is. It grows out of a statement by Margaret Thatcher in a *Woman's Own* interview in 1987 that has been haunting not only me but many others for many years when she said that there is no such thing as society, only an aggregate of individuals. On 16 November 1988 she praised Ronald Reagan for exemplifying 'the fire of individual freedom', but viewed from certain angles that phrase might prompt a number of qualified reactions. One wonders whether individualism could be one of her 'Victorian values'. Indeed it could, but I want to show that the more one looks into it modification and reservation is needed. It is possible to refer to the Victorians in discussing the concept of individualism, but it soon becomes apparent that for them it was a highly problematical concept, and it should be the same for us.

The word 'individualism' is not recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1840, where it appears in Henry Reeve's translation of volume 2 of Alexis De Tocqueville's (1805-1859) *Democracy in America*. Here is the full context in the chapter 'Of Individualism In Democratic Countries':

'I have shown how it is that in ages of equality every man seeks for his opinions within himself: I am now about to show how it is that, in the same ages, all his feelings are turned towards himself alone. Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with egotism. Egotism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person, and to prefer himself to everything in the world. Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. Egotism originates in blind instinct: individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment more than from depraved feelings; it originates as much in the deficiencies of the mind as in the perversity of the heart. Egotism blights the germ of all virtue; individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but, in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright egotism. Egotism is a vice as old as the world, which does not belong to one form of society more than to another: individualism is of democratic origin, and it threatens to spread in the same ratio as the equality of conditions.'

Reeve provides a footnote on the word:

'I adopt the expression of the original, however strange it may seem to the English ear, partly because it illustrates the remark on the introduction of general terms into democratic language which was made in a preceding chapter, and partly because I know of no English word exactly equivalent to the expression. The chapter itself defines the meaning attached to it by the author.'

It's striking that when the first occurrence of the word was seen it was already hedged about with reservations. Not surprising from an old-fashioned aristocrat colliding with a democratic society. It's appropriate that the concept should be found in this context, since America had been developing it since the eighteenth century, the *Declaration of Independence* speaks of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' Ralph Waldo Emerson recommended 'self culture' and aspects of it have permanently entered the collective American psyche, although Emerson was disapproving of egoists. As the century moved on it became more associated with overtly political positions, where it was opposed to collectivism and socialism. However the concept and the exercise of it were around well before then.

One example of an early individualist with his own theoretical backing was Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). The creation of Hamlet was not possible without him. He says, 'O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself king of infinite space – were it not that I have bad dreams.' There's individualism for you, so that even if he is not strictly speaking as a king he is still king of his inner world. He is striving here for such freedom that he has even broken for a while away from the blank verse that Shakespeare has imposed upon him.

Individualism is significantly underway in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the erosion of religious belief, and the weakening of the concept of the divinely ordained king. The development of trade and industry and the slow disappearance of class barriers allowed individuals to create a place for themselves in society, rather than passively acquiesce in the one that seems to have been pre-ordained. Greater interest was shown in private and even anti-social states of mind, in inner experience and acute sensibility, and the emergence of the novel at once registered, recorded and encouraged these developments. The Romantic movement further emphasised interest in the special and unique human soul and its experiences. But running alongside the espousal of self-interest during this period was an opposing strand of anti-individualism. One finds it in Scott and Carlyle, for whom chivalry implied service to one's fellows and high altruism as much as medieval bric-a-brac. One finds it in their followers, who wished to restore Camelot. The Eglinton Tournament of 1839 should be seen as more than a fancy-dress party. It was really not until later in the nineteenth century that a stronger and more emphatic philosophy of individualism was evolved. Most of the principal sources of individualistic rhetoric are found in this century rather than in any other. On the whole it was regarded in a positive light, but individualism received a philosophical emphasis in the writings of the utilitarians, whose basic premise was that society should be so organised as to secure the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This diverted attention away from the survival of the state and the subservience of the individual to reli-

gious creeds. Utilitarianism proposed that the successful organisation of society depended on the satisfaction of its members. This was something new in English political theory, although the Founding Fathers of United States had articulated such a programme in the famous phrase 'life liberty and the pursuit of happiness' in the Declaration of Independence. The utilitarian ideology had a limited and mechanical side that was unlovely, but it led to John Stuart Mill's *Essay on Liberty* (1859) which is one of the principal pleas for individualism in the century. In it he evinces the famous principle that individual freedom should not be interfered with if it has no adverse effect on one's fellows.

It is generally accepted that the roots of individualism lay in secularism and the growth of capitalism, but one could make an equally good case for its development in aesthetic contexts and the emergence of the visionary and alienated artist, whose loneliness gave him special perspectives. We see the encapsulation of this attitude in Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1860) (the work that Ghandi found compulsive reading): 'all effectual advancement towards this true felicity of the human race must be by individual, not public effort.'

There were individualists even more extreme than Ruskin. The most forceful was perhaps Walter Pater, whose *The Renaissance* (1873) became the bible for self-cultivating young men. He imagined the individual flourishing principally as an organism not to serve the church or the state, or to bind himself to dogmas and habits, but to collect and enjoy intense experiences. In his extreme early years he saw the individual isolated in a prison house of self, 'ringed round... by that thick wall of personality', remote from the world of duties and responsibilities, trapped in a subjective heaven, or possibly a subjective nightmare. Oscar Wilde seized on Pater's doctrines, vulgarized them a little and broadcast them with a popularizing zeal. One does not normally think of this pretentious popinjay or a knickerbockered poseur (as some people regard him) as a political theorist, far less as a socialist, but in his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891) he presents the individualist case in its extreme form. Here is the apex, the final corrupt flower of what the tendency had been inexorably leading to: 'One feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age..... Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type.' Wilde loved paradoxes, and there is a paradox in the title of the essay, since socialism is often opposed to individualism, but Wilde tries to reconcile them.

After Wilde's débacle, most main-line literary figures were wary of recommending aestheticism and extreme forms of hedonistic individualism. But the torch was taken up, trimmed of its preciousness and augmented with the *feu sacré* of sexuality by one of the last of the great Victorians (he just happened to live in the twentieth century): D.H. Lawrence. He had an almost mystic reverence for the concept of the unique individual: 'There is only one clue to the universe. And that is the individual soul within the individual being.' (*Fantasia of the Unconscious*, 1922)

Lawrence had a large number of phobias, but one of them was a fear of the power of the masses. He shared this fear with many intellectuals of his time; it is just that in his case it is more painfully acute. In *Education of the People* he writes: 'We want distinct individuals, and these are in-

compatible with swarms and masses.' He was concerned that modern education was reducing its recipients to subserviency: 'A real individual has a spark of danger in him, a menace to society. Quench this spark and you quench the individuality, you obtain a social unit, not an integral man. All modern progress has tended... to the production of quenched social units: dangerless beings, ideal creatures.' In his essay *Democracy* he has a complete section on individualism. He sees mankind as perpetually falling, not into sin, but into 'materialism or automatism', which will prevent the spontaneous being from coming into full blossom. Lawrence should be seen as one of the principal figures in the early twentieth century who transmitted a nexus of Victorian attitudes to us.

* * *

The writers I have just cited seem to build up an impressive and irrefutable case for the positive value of individualism. I feel as if I were offering the unregenerate Mrs. Thatcher a convenient anthology so that she could spice her speeches with literary references – always supposing she ever wanted to do such a thing, and always supposing it would be politically safe to press Pater, Wilde and Lawrence to her bosom. But as I have already suggested, the story is more complicated than that, since the Victorians, including the writers I have referred to who proposed its virtues, were sufficiently perceptive to register the dangers of individualism. They began to realise that the progress which industrialism offered was being bought at a cost, as individuals congregating in large cities became numbers rather than names and communal cohesiveness weakened. Even liberals began to see that the reviled Burke might have had a valid point when he spoke up for an organic society. Ruskin was a key proponent of individualism, and astonishingly in *The Nature of Gothic* he traced its presence in the builders of Gothic cathedrals, but he had sufficient flexibility of mind to recognise that extreme individualism would not do, since the kind of artistic creativity which he valued needed a healthy soil in which to flourish. Giorgione and Titian did not spring up *ex nihilo*, they would not have been possible without centuries of collective social will behind them; they sprang from a civic intelligence, guided by deeply held religious faith, that had achieved the miracle of building a city on the waves of the sea. For Ruskin, the history of Venice was not, as Margaret Thatcher might believe, the story of an aggregation of individuals responding to market forces, but of a corporate activity whose achievement was more impressive than the kind of thing isolated individuals, however visionary and well-meaning, would ever have been able to achieve.

Another figure who should be considered is Matthew Arnold. Here too we have an original individual, a portion of whose career is of the alienated and melancholic poet, suffering from 'the strange disease of modern life', gravitating towards the uplands away from Oxford, haunted by the patron saint of drop-outs, the Scholar Gypsy. But he spent too much time in the real world, as a Schools Inspector, not to be deeply troubled by the life of his time, and he felt the need to react to it not with selfish withdrawal, but by proposing remedies. And these remedies are in the interests of collective betterment. He anthropomorphised society: it had a self, and so it followed that it could have a better self and a worse self, and it was the responsibility

of collective will to promote the better self, by a process of education. He is known as one of the great liberal intellectuals of all time, and yet his attitudes did not allow to recommend the practice of 'doing as one likes' the whole time. How he would have hated Queen's songs 'I want to ride my bicycle/I want to ride it where I like' (presumably on the pavement) and 'Don't stop me now, I'm having a good time, I'm having a ball.' I hate them too, but mainly on aesthetic grounds.

Then there was Pater, the arch-priest of aestheticism and decadent self-indulgence. He too came to have reservations about his own extreme views, since he increasingly recognised that the individual needs the context of communities in which to flourish. He tended to feel affection and loyalty towards the immediate communities of school, university and monastery, rather than the vaguer and more diffuse macrocosmic communities of a whole country, and as he got older his sense of responsibility towards them intensified. And he realised that in return these communities repay the aesthete by supplying him with beautiful things to see, not only paintings, which can be produced by the private and alienated individual, but vast buildings like Canterbury Cathedral and Amiens Cathedral, whose erection requires a more collectively organised force. Not necessarily a religious force, since in his eyes the buildings were the triumph of secular energies. Something from the outside world does, after all, break in on the soul in its prison house. And even Wilde was able to recognise that 'Individualism generated under conditions of private property is not always, or even as a rule, of a fine or wonderful type.'

Following his Victorian forebears, D.H. Lawrence was prepared to register massive disquiets in the face of certain manifestations of individualism. The problem as he saw it was that individuality in action depended on will and conscious drives, and was a power for division and alienation in society. Much as he cherished 'the perfected singleness of the individual being' he employed certain uses of the word 'individualism', which implied a political stance as much as anything. In *Education of the People* he writes: 'The so-called individualism is no more than a cheap egotism, every self-conscious little ego assuming unbounded rights to display his self-consciousness.' This particular manifestation could not even be guaranteed to promote satisfactory private life, especially in the erotic department. He was caustic about the selfish egotism of modern life: 'They all want the same thing: a continuing in this state of disintegration wherein each separate little ego, is an independent little principality by itself.' And so he became increasingly anxious to tap the power lurking in more recondite parts of the human psyche. He wrote to Ottoline Morrell: 'Individuals do not *vitally* concern me any more. Only a *purpose* vitally concerns me, not individuals – neither my own individual self, nor any other.' (29 July 1915). He makes his characters go in search of these mysterious states too. In *Sons and Lovers* Paul says to Miriam: "'To be rid of our individuality, which is our will, which is our effort – to live effortless, a kind of conscious sleep – that is very beautiful, I think; that is our after-life – our immortality.'" (Chapter 11) Sexual contact was a way to break down the alienating effects of the isolated individual, so that it is not surprising to find a fair amount of anti-individualistic propaganda in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the drafts leading up to it: 'That hard little freedom of a separate, completely separated

individual, that was worse than a prison It was just a nail through one's heart.' (*The First Lady Chatterley*).

As Lawrence got older his distrust of individuality increased, and with it the sacred cows of political institutions that guaranteed it or which belief in democracy was the principal. These sentiments in *Apocalypse* (1931) are fairly typical: 'Modern democracy is made of millions of frictional parts all asserting their own wholeness.' 'To have a creed of individuality which denies the reality of the hierarchy makes at last for mere anarchy.'

In our own time the dominant voices have been reiterating the individualist claim, and the consumer society has made its appeals to self-satisfaction and private gratification. But occasionally a voice cries in the wilderness, as for example Irish Murdoch in her famous essay *Against Dryness*: 'We need to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth.' (*Encounter*, 1961). John Fowles, who sometimes supports the individualist ethic with vigour, nevertheless deplores some of its tendencies: 'One consequence of our new awareness of death must be, and has been, an alarming growth of both national and individual selfishness, a Gadarene rush to enjoy the pleasures of the shops and senses before they close for ever.' (*The Aristos*, 1964). In a larger sense the 'shops' Fowles alludes to here are not only Fortnum and Mason's but the global resources of the natural world. The poet D. J. Enright, who has had experience of ideologies other than the Western, makes an astonishing statement in *Things falling apart*: 'An alarming sickness spread through the world, a plague which some called by an ancient name, individualism.' But it is only astonishing if one is incapable of stepping outside the current received wisdom for a moment.

Viewed unsympathetically these quotations, both for and against individualism, might seem to constitute a tissue of ideological antiquarianism, of no relevance or interest to contemporary concerns. But I do not see them in that light: rather they help to establish the parameters of discussion, and to provide us with some terms of reference which are still valid. The picture that finally emerges is that satisfactory life is going to depend on a balance between egoism and altruism, and that no deeply satisfactory life is possible if the citizen does not believe that he or she is part of a society that has identity, vision, direction and purpose. Private gratification is not enough; we need to believe that we are surrounded by a healthy communal life. It was some feeling of this kind that prevented the great early Victorian socialist William Morris from locking himself away in a do-it-yourself paradise. He could have afforded it financially, but not psychically. If Margaret Thatcher had read and understood the previous literature on the subject would she have come out with something quite as obtuse as the statement which prompted this essay? Probably not.

One thing which has put a question mark over the uninhibited pursuit of individual happiness is the realisation that finding refuge and satisfaction in the inner mind can lead to dissatisfaction, because it cuts one off from not only other human beings but the natural world. To adapt Dryden, 'Thy chase had a beast in view' (*The Secular Masque*) but the beast of solitary pleasure could not be caught, or if it were caught it could not guarantee satisfaction. With the natural world now under more threat than ever before it is becoming apparent that the relentless cultivation of individual and irresponsible pleasures if gen-

erally expanded can actually threaten that world. David Attenborough once came up with the phrase ‘frivolous travel’. I’d like to hear him expand on that. The Romantic poets had the choice of turning inwards and outwards, but none of them could have foreseen that the beneficent impact of the outward gaze was not itself a guarantee of the continuation of nature. None of them could have fore-

seen that failure to have an enlightened view of nature could endanger its very existence. None of them could have conceived that one day someone would be writing a book called *The Death of Nature*. Which Carolyn Merchant did in 1980, and then nine years later a man got in on the act: Bill McKibben with *The Death of Nature*.

Remembering Professor Graham Richards:

An enduring innovative impact on Oxford

TIANCUN XIAO and PETER P. EDWARDS

We can only express our deep sorrow to hear of the recent death of Professor Graham Richards, an inspirational mentor, tutor and close friend to us both for more than 20 years. Graham was truly a ‘giant’ in the Oxford scene and beyond; a pioneer of computer-aided drug discovery, a computational chemist with a long and distinguished career at Oxford plus periods in Paris and spells at Stanford and Berkeley. As well as fundraising and building a new world-class Chemical Research Laboratory (CRL) at Oxford, he paved the way for a persuasive culture for creating successful businesses from the university’s intellectual property.

“Oxford needs more Profs of Welsh origin, e.g. you, me and JMT” (JMT being Professor Sir John Meurig Thomas), quoting from an exchange with one of us (PPE). This beautifully reflects Graham’s mischievous side; this statement related to our common origins and indeed – on our mutual reflection some years ago – on how we both ever ended up in Oxford. Graham noted that his own ending-up in Oxford would surely have been hard to predict. His mother, one of 14 children in rural mid-Wales, left school at the age of 11 – even though the legal age was 14. Like her sisters she was sent off to work at a wealthy family in Birkenhead as a domestic servant, which was lucky for him as Birkenhead School was extremely good. Birkenhead was a Direct Grant School which was a significant route for poor, but bright children to get a first-class education.

The passing of Professor Graham Richards marks the end of an era in computational chemistry, academic leadership, and mentorship at Oxford. To those who knew him, he was not merely a pioneering scientist but a visionary institution-builder, a storyteller of history and UK – particularly Welsh! – culture, and a compassionate guide who shaped and advanced the careers and lives of many. This essay is a short tribute to a man whose brilliance was matched only by his humanity, and whose legacy continues to resonate across academia, industry, and the hearts of those he inspired.

The Architect of Computational Chemistry: Pioneering a New Frontier

Graham was a trailblazer in computational chemistry, a field that transformed drug discovery from serendipity into precision. Long before “Big Data” became a buz-

word, he recognized the potential of computers to model molecular interactions, predict drug efficacy, and accelerate the development of life-saving therapies. His work laid the groundwork for rational drug design, enabling researchers to simulate how molecules bind to specific targets – a methodology now foundational in pharmaceutical research.

Under his guidance, Oxford became a hub for computational chemistry. Collaborations with pharmaceutical giants like GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer underscored his belief in partnership. Yet, he remained a vocal and fierce advocate for open science, ensuring that all institutions and developing nations could access these technologies. His mantra: “Science serves humanity, not just shareholders.”

Bridging Academia, Industry and Business

Graham was no ivory-tower academic. He understood that genuine innovation thrives at the intersection of theory and application. His commercialization of computational tools – such as the software package AutoDock and the founding of his company Oxford Molecular (later acquired by Accelrys) – demonstrated his commitment to turning academic insights and innovations into real-world solutions. These tools became industry standards, empowering researchers worldwide to design drugs for diseases ranging from cancer to HIV.

A Kingdom Builder: The £60 Million Vision

As Head of Oxford Chemistry (1997–2006), Graham undertook the Herculean task of modernizing the department’s infrastructure. The present Chemistry Research Laboratory (CRL), a £60 million marvel completed in 2004, stands as a testament to his fundraising genius and relentless drive. He persuaded donors, lobbied governments, and courted industry partners – all with equal charm – arguing that “Chemistry is the science of the future – but only if we invest in it today.”

Despite such huge administrative burdens, Graham remained an active researcher. Colleagues recall him reviewing grant proposals at dusk, then lecturing on quantum mechanics at dawn. His leadership style blended ambition with humility; he once joked to Tiancun Xiao

(TX): “A Head’s job is to make everyone else’s job easier – except when it’s time to go out for money!”

Oxford University Innovation: A Catalyst for Change

Long before tech transfer offices became commonplace in the UK, Graham with colleagues founded Isis Innovation (now Oxford University Innovation) in 1988. This remarkable platform turned academic research into patents, commercial start-ups, and societal solutions. His foresight ensured that Oxford’s discoveries – whether in drug design, or more recently in our own case, clean energy – reached the market place, creating jobs and saving lives. One example, Oxford Nanopore Technologies was a spin-out from the Department of Chemistry under the deal set up to fund the new CRL. Upon an outstandingly successful Stock Market flotation, the company benefitted the University by about £50 million. It was always a source of amazement and great irritation to Graham that this was never publicly highlighted by Oxford University (*Oxford Magazine* No. 436, page 19, 2nd Week, Michaelmas Term 2021). His remarkable support for another Chemistry spin-out, Oxford Catalysts is noted below.

In 2003, when TX’s own research hit an impasse, Graham shared a story of his early career – a failed experiment that later inspired a breakthrough. “Science,” he recalled, “isn’t about being right. It’s about being persistent.” Fittingly, just two years later he led the team that invested in TX and Prof Malcolm Green’s spin-out Oxford Catalysts Ltd in Oct 2005. Two years later, that company was floated on the London Stock Exchange. The flotation valuation of Oxford Catalysts in May 2006 was £65m.

Always a Mentor and a Mensch: “The Welshman Who Loved Stories”

To his students, Graham was also a colourful raconteur. Over coffee, he’d often recount how Welsh naming traditions – whether they be “Jones” or “Evans” became family names in our subject – and mirrored the evolution of scientific paradigms. “History isn’t just dates,” he’d say. “It’s the stories of people who dared to think differently.” These anecdotes weren’t digressions; they were potent lessons in curiosity.

On Inclusivity

In an earlier era of academic elitism, Graham championed inclusivity by always using his own personal background and experiences. He mentored junior researchers regardless of social background, nationality, gender, or academic pedigree. When TX arrived at Oxford as a wide-eyed newcomer from China, when once passing his office, Graham welcomed him with warmth, quipping and coffee, “The best chemistry happens when diverse minds and areas naturally collide.” His door was always open, whether to discuss a failed experiment or a personal struggle. Even in his 70s, he attended student symposia, offering feedback with equal parts rigor and encouragement. “Don’t fear failure,” he’d say. “Fear irrelevance.” His grants, mentorship and supporting references helped countless protégés

secure positions, from Oxford to Silicon Valley and to China.

Conclusion: The Eternal Catalyst

Graham Richards was a catalyst in every true sense of the word – accelerating reactions (both chemical and human), transforming institutions, and igniting young (and not-so-young!) minds. His legacy lives on in the algorithms that power drug discovery, the laboratories and corridors of the Chemical Research Laboratory, and the generations he inspired – including, of course, your two correspondents. To Graham, science was not a profession but a calling – one that demanded rigor, creativity, and – above all – humanity. As we mourn his passing, we also celebrate a life that reminds us: the greatest discoveries are not made in silos, but in the connections between people.



The séance

For the Irish diaspora

There's a séance being held in the back room
of O'Leary's cosy pub this afternoon.
I'll introduce all present, one by one.
Who's missing, when a jolly's so soon done?
Madame Sosostri is the medium,
much taken with her usual tedium.
Slyly playing footsie under the table
with Lady Gregory (but unable
to discern if she's there and responding)
Eliot takes her for Milton, bonding.
But is this a weird and mad delusion?
He's much given to echo and allusion,
going on about the classics far too much –
he's clearly prejudiced and out of touch.

Look round the room now. See how the crowd grows.
There are many friends here and I see no foes.
Browning is amused, distracting Shelley
from a feather he now thinks is silly.
How can a feather, found by a poet,
be confused with a man? He must know it.
He tries a video chat with Harold Bloom
but finds it more a faff than Skype or Zoom.
Maud Gonne has made mint-tea which no one drinks,
preferring Guinness and the wholesome Kinks.
Kavanagh has come in late and cold,
having just been for a walk down Raglan Road –
not making hay, although the Queen of Hearts
still seems to be intent on making tarts.

Van Morrison has tried telepathy
to explain what Patrick's lyrics signify
and after hearing every single version
he states his preference. No aspersions,
he thinks the young Dick Gaughan's is the best.
They listen, put their tired taste to the test,
and with one exception (that of Shelley)
spurn Gaughan in favour of Luke Kelly.
Yeats is now absorbed in a discussion
with Shelley about Plato, but percussion
is so loud from Milton and some others
that they cannot hear a word, though brothers.
Shelley gives up. He has no time to waste
with these poets, no matter what their taste.

Madam George, who drops in for the craic
after attending a too-solemn wake
is like a ragged gypsy with that set
of Tarot cards. She quickly makes a bet
that no one there will pick the Magician –
but she's wrong. Yeats knows he's a patrician
and shouts aloud his grateful mention –
then nicks the card for gambling-debts and pension.
Who should turn up but grumpy Geoffrey Hill?
Though out of place, no one would wish him ill.
If he wants to make friends, he should learn
how to communicate, not shun and spurn.
He's desperate, and opts for 'Phone a Friend'
but they are out, or gone. All good things end.

Madam Sosostri holds her crystal ball
(a gift from Tycoon Kane after his fall)
and tells the fortunes of all present. Some
have hopes of hearing from the only one

whose crushing influence leaves them shaking,
gesticulating, and hesitating.
They all choose the Bard, immortal Shakespeare –
but why should he turn a ghost's deaf ear
to this drunken gang, now out of their skulls?
Death is oblivious and it annuls
all debts, bonds, and responsibilities.
The deceased are free to do as they please.
Leave him in his Stratford-on-Avon tomb.
Back at O'Leary's, wait for what will come.

Time's moving on – the lot of them stone-drunk.
The scene moves to the Dublin Drunk Tank
at the police station, where they're glad to meet
a few inebriates from off the street –
the Irish diaspora, back and bawling,
now jovially and musically calling
to someone, anyone, for happy songs.
Though not performers, they will sing along.
O'Neill and Hansard, tuneful and close friends,
are glad that festive song can make amends.
They sing 'Galway Bay' to the police all day.
Although it isn't Christmas (and there's no way
Shane MacGowan can hear them from his grave)
there's still a load of people he can save.

Ian Duhig lands in next, and he's not drinking,
being much more prone to mournful thinking –
but he's witty, and brings them all good cheer
without the need of whisky, brandy, beer.
Yeats has forgotten his treasured Ouija board
and looks for where the apple juice is stored.
Everyone wishes Tommy Makem were here
for 'The Butcher Boy' which they hold dear.
The jigging Clancy brothers miss their friend
but they'll stay dancing until the very end.
Pete Seeger has invited them all back
to appear on his show, but what they lack
is dosh for an airplane: the fare is steep;
the flight will give them jetlag and no sleep.

The police are dancing with their inmates,
drinking champagne and loading paper plates
with haggis, sausages, and venison.
It's time now for our great Lord Tennyson
to raise the tone and ring out his wild bells
for New Year's Day. The music quickly swells,
spreading joy far and wide to distant lands
reached many times before by Irish bands.
Bob Dylan has turned up to set all free.
'Ring them Bells' he calls for sweet Liberty –
the Bells of Rhymney taking up his song,
Pete Seeger helping all to sing along.
John Prine drops in to say 'hello in there'
from his lonely grave. Loud clapping fills the air.

Country music is under-represented –
but perhaps that cannot be prevented?
Kris Kristofferson's dead. God rest his soul.
Haggard, Jennings, Cash: that Reaper's on a roll.
We all want Willie Nelson to be here
But on the road again, he's far from near.
Hank Williams is with Dylan Thomas
drinking whisky. They're both comatose
and leaving Alabama, best of friends –
no end to the good wishes they both send.
Guy Clark has chosen a simple life
on a farm with a nice, god-fearing wife.
Lightfoot is watching early morning rain
which stops him from jumping a jet-plane.

It's a jamboree in Dublin and New York.
Policemen in both places talk the talk.
It's a fairytale, the bells are ringing.
All over the world, good folk are singing.
James Joyce demands that singers are all paid
but it's over now as day comes and they fade.
Spare a thought for the hobo as you go:
he's starving, so please at least say hello.
Give him soup, a euro, at least a dime.
'Auld Lang Syne' the world over all clocks chime.
Think of the homeless drunks as you head home –
they'll all be sleeping rough till Kingdom come.
Spread good will around the world. Yes, it's time.
Go, sleep deep. Dreams will lull you with a rhyme.

An exchange of gifts

for Bernard O'Donoghue

It started as a friendship game
after we met for tea one day.
We sent each other ballads, songs,
choosing the greatest we could name
to give and receive our saddest tears.

I looked deep in his heart and mine,
seeking favourites to send with love.
But my friend, with Irish melancholy
hardwired in his brain, has known
bleaker songs than I will ever find.

I thought I had the saddest story
of all time, 'The Butcher Boy', sung
by Tommy Makem. I assumed I'd win,
but he had heard it sung by Tommy.
I pictured them at the gig back then...

Not to be outdone, he in return
sent the haunting 'Ballad of Claudy'.
I read it, sang it, stunned all day.
No way could I score as high as he –
so, there was nothing left to say.

I sensed him listening: *An explosion
too loud for your eardrums to bear.
Young children squealing like pigs
in the square...* Seeing the whole scene,
whose pain is it I go on feeling?

Flowing freely now as it did then,
ballad by ballad, song by song,
gift for gift, tear for sombre tear –
the canon might unroll before me
and I'd never find a keener pain.

LUCY NEWLYN

Professor Lucy Newlyn taught English Language and Literature at St Edmund Hall for thirty-five years, retiring in 2016. She is an expert on English Romanticism and has published widely in this field. Since 2000, when she became a poet, she has published six collections of poetry and a memoir; last year she also published an experimental novel, *The Forum*. She lives mostly in Oxford, visiting Cornwall for lengthy stretches of time, where she stays with her husband in their shared farmhouse near the sea.

Confederate Cinema

BILL WHELAN

It was a simple phone call made years ago from my Manhattan office. I spoke to a New York attorney whose last name was Boykin and whose schooling was done in South Carolina. I asked if he was related to Mary Boykin Chesnut, the author of a noted diary about the Confederacy. 'Yes, I'm the great, great, great nephew.' 'I've read the diary in installments but never the whole thing. I take it out on loan from the library.' 'Then why don't you do it all. I'll mail you a copy.' The diary contains subtle insights and raw peculiarities. Sections of it concern racial matters and make jolting reading – unseemly to modern ears. Other parts recount jarring scenes from the tail end of the Civil War when the dregs of the Union Army rampaged through the South and debased women from every corner of society. In my view the diary is essential to understanding the fortunes of the Confederacy, and the confidences and concerns of the people who made it so.

'Language is the writer's medium, used by him as the painter uses form, line, and colour. The attribute of language should be livingness – that is, not a word should be so employed as to give out a dull or deadening ring or seem to have exhausted its significance.' (Elizabeth Bowen speaking to an editor at *Mademoiselle* magazine in May, 1953). Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823–1886) knew this so well. Her diary/journal, written during the American Civil War and revised by her in subsequent years, still claims attention from all corners for its vividness. Its influence rays out to several civil war oeuvres – from Shelby Foote's quilted prose narrative to Ken Burns's aching PBS-TV documentary. The literary critic Edmund Wilson dwelled on her writing in his work *Patriotic Gore*. He likened the Chesnut clan with its antebellum five square mile of plantations to the household of the Bolkonskys in *War & Peace* – 'comparisons with Russia seems inevitable when one is writing about the old South.'

The city of Charleston of her youth was urbane '*with a notable semi-public library, thriving bookstores, excellent newspapers, mantua makers and milliners in touch with Paris fashions, a thronged race course, dancing assemblies, and easy-mannered men's clubs.*' She knew many of the old line Huguenot families. Their names roll through the diary pages, all the Ravenels and Trezevants. She also mixed easily with the city's Sephardic Jews. She was cosmopolitan in her interests and appetites. Early on she attended a fashionable female seminary set off by high brick walls topped with rows of broken glass bottles. It was run by refugees from the slave revolt in Saint Domingue/Haiti. There she picked up a fluency in French from an imperious instructor. She read around and was avid to obtain foreign novels. Books and newspapers were exchanged freely among her set. Opinion in the northern papers – however bumptious and biased it must have seemed to her circle – was sought out. Charleston offered the South

the same enticements as the seaports of Savannah and New Orleans. These were so many chiaroscuro outlets to offset the stark sameness found in the interior. The Anglo-Saxon South was never so Saxon as to pass on the taste of Creole planters or the talents of Cuban émigrés. A tolerance so bowed it was able to skirt the color bar on occasion.

MBC met her husband – very much of the plantocracy – in Charleston. She was also there at the onset of the Civil War with the bombardment of Fort Sumter. The diary picks out the scene. It is April, 1861. There is shelling in the distance. The city's citizens are giddy over this runction. Meanwhile, Black servants move around her seamlessly. She muses about their condition. '*Not by one word or look can we detect any change in the demeanor of these negro servants.*' And about her husband's valet:

'Laurence sits at our door, as sleepy and as respectful and as profoundly indifferent. So are they all. They carry it too far. You could not tell that they hear even the awful row that is going on in the bay, though it is dinning in their ears night and day. And people talk before them as if they were chairs and tables. And they make no sign. Are they stolidly stupid or wiser than we are, silent and strong, biding their time?'

Some months later the diary dwelled on a murder case. One of MBC's elderly relatives was smothered in her bed by Black household servants. The news item circulated, roiling its readers. This speaks to the deep unease planters had over the prospect of a slave uprising. From the diary: '*I am sure I will never sleep again without this nightmare of horror haunting me.*' She must have heard stark accounts of massacres in St Domingue/Haiti from her émigré instructors at school. In the 1860 South Carolina census slaves vastly outnumbered whites. Yet she entrusted her diamonds to her Black household maid who shared the many hardships with her in the course of the war. That included a visit the author made to her mother who was ill and residing in a remote district. Deep into the night, fending off a rollicking lout, the two travelled on a '*carriage road, through long lanes, swamps of pitchy darkness, plantations on every side... As we drew near the house it looked like a graveyard in a nightmare – so sad, so weird, so vague and phantom like in its outlines.*'

Her eye ranged over Southern society. '*Everybody gave Milly a helping hand. She was a perfect specimen of the sandhill tackey race, sometimes called country crackers. Her skin was yellow and leathery; even the whites of her eyes were bilious in color. She was stumpy and strong and lean, hard-featured, horney-fisted.*' Also – utterly dependent on the largesse of the planter households and cranky when it was not promptly offered. But if MBC was skeptical of neighboring crackers she was scathing about distant Yankees who live '*in nice New*

England homes—clean, clear, sweet-smelling—shut up in libraries, writing books which ease their hearts of their bitterness to us, or editing newspapers—all [of] which pays better than anything else in the world... What self-denial they do practice? It is the cheapest philanthropy trade in the world—easy. Easy as setting John Brown to come down here and cut our throats in Christ's name.'

Then there was the enmeshment with slavery:

'I wonder if it be a sin to think slavery a curse to any land. Sumner [an abolitionist US Senator] said not one word of this hated institution which is not true. Men and women are punished when their masters and mistresses are brutes and not when they do wrong—and then we live surrounded by prostitutes. An abandoned woman is sent out of any decent house elsewhere. Who thinks any worse of a negro or mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name? God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system and wrong... Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children—and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think.'

So all manner of men and women appear on its pages—spies, widows, grantees and arrivistes, supplicants, imposters, belles and their suitors, editors, poets, blockade runners, kitchen staff, soldiers maimed or whole—and with them all manner of opinions including some decidedly anti-slavery. Amid this olio traffic there is an almost casual admission of misfortune from a Confederate general. He comes from an old line family, owning a plantation situated on a peninsula and one torched in the war. *'Why not. I am not less patriotic than my forefathers. Our house was burned by the British in the first revolution, again by the British in 1812. We are so easy to get at, so near the coast, and the Yankees have followed suit and burned me out once more.'*

In this sort of society kinship was essential. The family credo extended out to distant cousins, so a wide web which exercised its influence usefully and repeatedly. An item from a book about the *Confederate Secret Service*—April '65:

'Family associations were important in another way. In the days before the invention of fingerprinting, the polygraph, and other modern police techniques that help in determining trustworthiness, the safest course in any secret endeavor was to deal with people that one knew well from personal contact. In that way, the confidence man and the informant planted by the enemy could be more easily avoided. Family members, neighbors, classmates—particularly classmates from West Point and VMI—and members of the same lodge, club, or church congregation were people that one knew best.'

This was how a lot of the Confederate administration and army were staffed. MBC's husband was an agent to this recruitment and promotion. It explains much of the workings in a region which was arranged according to territorial clans. Soldiers were recruited locally; a regiment might be composed entirely from abutting counties. While visiting the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond (now renamed) some years

ago I saw the regimental battle flags arrayed and noticed the wide variety in their shape and color. Many looked homespun and off-kilter, with their association to a specific locality asserted next to the various battles they took part in. All this hand stitched.

The diary goes panoramic on occasion and carries the reader with it. From its pages a depiction of a Confederate corps *en route*:

'At Kingsville I caught a glimpse of our army. Longstreet's corps going west... Not one man intoxicated—not one rude word did I hear. It was a strange sight—miles, apparently, of platform cars—soldiers rolled in their blankets, lying in rows, heads and all covered, fast asleep. In their gray blankets, packed in regular order, they looked like swathed mummies.'

Other times the diary looks inward, at the author's precarity:

'It excited me so—I quickly took opium, and that I kept up. It enables me to retain every particle of mind or sense or brains I ever have and so quiets my nerves that I can calmly reason and take rational views of things otherwise maddening...'

By February of 1864, the Confederacy was suffering reverses in nearly every theatre of war. It was short of men and matériel; it also saw a decline in morale. So the author's circumstances were reduced and she removed to basic lodgings in the Piedmont boondocks. Money was short while her social circle shrunken. She had to rely on kindnesses from others who realized her straightened situation and whom she often times did not know too well. Gone were the salons of Richmond and all the *merveilleux* airs and amenities—the high spirits and clever charades and agile conversations, with repasts of *'Terrapin stew, gumbo, fish, oysters in any shape, game, wine as good as wine ever is. I do not mention juleps, claret clubs, and apple tody, whiskey punches, and all that.'* Now she must shift any way she can. On one occasion she was suspected at a railroad hotel of being an imposter what with her dress soiled and torn.

Her removal to the obscure interior was done with a particular purpose. She was trying to evade the Union raiding parties which were scouring the nearby cities and countryside. The raiders saw their mission as retribution but were not choosy about their methods. Their sly routine:

'They were regularly organized. First squads demanded arms and whiskey. Then came the rascals who hunted for silver and ransacked the ladies' wardrobes and scared the women and children into fits. At least, those who can be scared. Some of these women cannot be. Then came some smiling, suave, well-dressed officers who regretted it all so much. And then, outside the gate, officers, men, bummers, divided even—share and share alike—the piles of plunder.'

Inflation's toll:

'Gave 375 dollars for my mourning [attire]. Which consists of a black alpaca dress and a crape veil. Bonnet, gloves, and all, it came to (\$500) five hundred. Before the blockade these things would not have been thought fit for a chambermaid.'

Inflation, attrition, privation, desertions. The Harrowing of the South. Done by a Union general intent on total war. The planter caste saw they were going to be undone. MBC surely saw it: the tailend of the diary is consumed with this prospect. There is some choice repartee exchanged at this point. In this case the speaker is referring to the author's husband: 'Will General Chesnut be shot as a soldier – or hung as a senator?' The husband replying: 'But after all, it is only a choice between drumhead court-martial, short shrift, and a lingering death at home from starvation.' The Chesnuts's state was the cradle of secession. So it had to pay. *The New York Tribune*: 'South Carolina is the meanest and the vainest state in the Union... and nobody will feel any compunction at laying it waste.' Stupefaction from the diarist, for the devastation meant that little was left behind 'only chimneys, like telegraph poles, to carry the news of Sherman's army backward.' Just a barren, blasted landscape. It might be 1945 London which Elizabeth Bowen said looked 'like the moon's capital ... shallow, cratered, extinct.'

At the war's end the Chesnut family returned to their plantation. The traveling party, on reaching the Wateree River near to home, found they did not have the simple silver specie to pay the ferryman. The plantation itself was ransacked, with the cotton gin mills wrecked while their own books and private letters were found strewn along the public road. Hard times followed. Meagre proceeds from a business selling eggs and butter. Many ex-slaves, though, stayed on and worked as loyal hired help. Society saw her as eccentric – a stray market woman. A post-war letter set out her plaintive state:

'[T]here are nights here with the moonlight, cold and ghastly, & the whippoorwills, & the screech owls alone disturbing the silence when I could tear my hair & cry aloud for all that is past & gone. I lived once opposite an officer's hospital in Richmond & I dream now of the everlasting dead march & muffled drum – & empty saddle & the led war horse...'

* * *

Princeton College appears repeatedly in the account. The author's husband went there, her father-in-law too, as well as others from her set. That school was associated with landed Southerners all through the 19th century and well into the 20th. One member of the class of 1849, leaving his post lecturing ancient Greek for a saddle in the Confederate cavalry, survived an engagement with a shot to the thigh. 'I lost my pocket Homer, I lost my pistol, I lost one of my horses, and finally, I came near losing my life.' Postbellum, the college tried to trace alumni scattered across distant Delta plantations. Records were scarce by then. One plantation was so isolated it did not hear of the surrender at Appomattox till months afterwards.

Princeton College barred undergraduate admission to Blacks for ages. The Robesons were a talented African-American family embedded in central New Jersey. The preacher father – himself enslaved as a youth – had several sons who could have prospered at Princeton. But the college was too reactionary, too haughty to appreciate their talents. So no engagement for them, no chance to mix with the likes of Edmund Wilson (P'16),

the poet John Peale Bishop or novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald (both P'17). One of the Robeson's sons recounted their plight:

'Almost every Negro in [the town of] Princeton lived off the college and accepted the social status that went with it. We lived for all intents and purposes on a Southern plantation. And with no more dignity than that suggests – all the bowing and scraping to the drunken rich, all the vile names, all the Uncle Tomming to earn enough to lead miserable lives.'

A New York-based essayist, John Jay Chapman, was puzzled by Princeton's arrangements. He saw them as backward-looking. In 1915 he wrote:

'We have not yet got free from some of the intellectual consequences of slavery. The old cruelty of the plantation is gone, and yet I sometimes hear rich people in club-rooms arguing about the negro question in a spirit, and from a point of view, that indicates intellectual injury. My own friends sometimes show scars of the mind in dealing with [this] question. They become for a moment like sixteenth-century pirates, – their eyes glitter, and they talk tyranny. Yet these men are now mere relics. The newer age shows ever fewer of the type.'

(Memories and Milestones)

This legacy of segregation was to nag at Princeton when in the mid-1960s it sought to recruit Blacks and found that those whom it approached 'often wouldn't apply, those admitted often did not come, those who came often did not stay.' Too many Robeson rejections to their liking. Wisely, the college hired an astute Black dean at that time who mentored incessantly to ease their predicament. Yet this unease continued into the 1980s when a Black enrollee like Michelle Obama appeared and expressed concerns over caste as well as color – viz, the undue scrutiny which she found patronizing and unwanted.

* * *

What were MBC's expectations and intentions for the diary/journal? Was it meant as an examination of the Rebellion by an insider not completely besotted with the society out of which it sprang? Or maybe as a salve to the bruises and batterment taken on by its participants many of whom were her kith and kin? Is it possible there was another, opaque point to it? Suppose it was meant to serve as a hoard. Not a monetary hoard but a memory one. Something to be stashed away and then retrieved generations later so to be examined and employed. Employed as what?

I like to imagine the diary as material for a medium just being invented – the movie industry. In this scenario, MBS is really functioning as a scriptwriter and her subject 'The War' with all its unsettling alarms and salvific trysts. Her appetites were bookish, yet her instincts were driven by drama.

Graham Green's genius is said to be suited to the cinema. That meant the tautness and quickness of his lines. The same agility applies to MBC. Film is the liveliest art, isn't it? The MGM production *Gone With the Wind* comes immediately to mind. The diary takes up the climactic Battle of Atlanta, but from a distant perch and without the panoramic shots of Confederate wounded.

Certain lines from that film have a bite to them which MBC might appreciate – ‘*I mean, there is not a cannon factory in the whole South... I’m saying very plainly the Yankees are better equipped than us. They have factories, coal mines, a fleet that can bottle up our harbors and starve us to death. All we got is cotton, slaves, and arrogance.*’ Yet the association of her with that blockbuster may be too obvious. She did not care for the song Dixie. She may not have cared for Martha Mitchell’s melodrama – just ‘*The Birth of a Nation soaked in sugar.*’

There is another Civil War film more suitable to her talents. *The Beguiled* was written and directed by Sofia Coppola – someone not given to doing blockbusters. It takes place at an isolated Virginia seminary. A sly, subtle tale. Colin Farrell plays a Union soldier who, wounded in a nearby engagement, is found slumped on the seminary’s grounds. An Irish immigrant, he is not gung-ho about the war and wants out. The all-women staff and pupils are ardent pro-Confederate; they are hesitant at first about treating him; why not turn him over to the passing Rebel columns. But he insinuates himself into their good graces. He flatters them. Each – beguiled – thinks she is the center of his affection. Yet,

this guile is undone by his volatile response to a botched operation on his leg. ‘What have you done to me, you vengeful bitches?’ Several of his admirers turn on him. So they prepare him a dish of poison mushrooms. They go seamlessly from caring to cold-eyed. This does him in and the corpse is then deposited in a shroud attached to the front gate. The passing Confederate Army wagons can then carry it off. A desolate setting, quick repartee, shifting fortunes – *The Beguiled* might have been lifted straight out of the diary’s pages.

Confederate Cinema – care of Coppola and Chesnut.

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REVIEWS

A Timeless Comedy



“*The Marriage of Figaro*”, English National Opera, 5th February 2025

In Hemmingway’s “*Death in the Afternoon*” he observes that one can only read so much about bullfighting, there comes a point when one has to experience it. So it is with opera too, with the rider that a poor choice for one’s first experience of opera may put one off the art form for life. So when my cousin said that going to the opera was on her hit list of things to do in her 60th year celebrations, I immediately scoured the ‘what’s on’ columns and rapidly fell upon ENO’s “*Marriage of Figaro*” as the ideal introduction to opera. It did not disappoint.

Mozart’s opera, based on the stage play by Beaumarchais, was first performed in Vienna in 1786. The Count’s manservant, Figaro, is to be married to the Countess’s maid, Susanna. However, the Count wishes to have his wicked way with Susanna before the wedding, as he has had with several other young women, whilst remaining very jealous and deeply suspicious of his wife, the Countess, whom he has ignored for many years and who has committed no impropriety whatsoever. His attempts to thwart the wedding are bolstered by Dr Bartolo, the music teacher Don Basilio and Dr Bartolo’s housekeeper (the latter

claiming to have a marriage contract with Figaro). In Figaro and Susanna’s camp are the Countess and the page boy Cherubino. Quick thinking and disguises, including jumping out of the window when the Count unexpectedly enters the Countess’ room, keep the Count from understanding exactly what is going on. It transpires that Figaro is the abandoned lovechild of Dr Bartolo and his housekeeper, and the last laugh is executed by the Countess and Susanna when they exchange clothes for an assignation with the Count: Figaro thinks Susanna is being unfaithful to him whilst the Count does not realise he is making advances to his own wife.

There are those who feel the opera is a harbinger of the social unrest which led to the French revolution three years later, but I whole-heartedly concur with Director Joe Hill-Gibbins’ view that it is “primarily a piece about character and relationships – much more than it is about world or mood or theme. Of course, the piece is animated by clear ideas – primarily about sex and power”. One only has to glance at a newspaper to see that the abuse of power is not something which ended with the eighteenth century, nor have the insecurities, desires and jealousies of relationships with the opposite sex changed so much since then, which is why “*Marriage of Figaro*” is still relevant for modern audiences. That said, there is almost something contemporary

about the way the women outwit the men in the final scene.

The curtain went up at the start of the overture to reveal a simple plain white set with four doors, through which the cast and chorus continuously pass, opening and shutting the doors as they do. It is reminiscent of a ‘70s bedroom farce and puts us on notice that this is the path the production is heading down. I was unsure about this at the outset, but upon reflection, it absolutely sets the tone. Indeed, one of my favourite moments was when Figaro appears with his baton, and conducts the entire chorus, packed behind the four doors, whilst they sing the Count’s praises for abolishing ‘le droit de seigneur’ (the irony being that is precisely what the Count wishes to reinstate in Susanna’s case). The other quirk in the staging is that the set with the four doors can be raised, allowing for a second level (the stage itself) on which action can take place, facilitating the overhearing of confidential conversations and allowing two areas of activity on stage simultaneously.

I thought bass-baritone David Ireland’s Figaro was excellent. He had a deep rich tone to his voice, and conveyed effectively the quick witted Figaro responding to events unfolding around him, but also his readiness to believe Susanna is unfaithful when he is duped in the garden and the lame “of course I knew it was you” right at the end! Mary Bevan’s Susanna came across as a young woman knowing exactly how far

she was going and how to lead the Count on but also with a genuine fear of what the Count might do. Soprano Nardus Williams evoked real pity when singing of how the Count wooed and then abandoned her, and no one begrudges her the last laugh when she turns the tables on the Count. Cody Quattlebaum's count had the requisite double standards of a lecher pursuing Susanna and outrage that Cherubino (or anyone) might be flirting with his wife; he also conveyed well the bewilderment arising from knowing the wool is being pulled over his eyes but not how. I thought all four main characters were strong. Hanna Hip's page boy Cherubino conveyed the gaucheness of an inexperienced youth attracted to the Countess, very friendly with Susanna and about to be married to Barbarina.

There was a nice tableau when Susanna and the Countess sway in unison whilst Cherubino sings the poem he has written: indeed the production had an Assistant Director Movement (Jenny Ogilvie) to facilitate this aspect, which explains why the choreography was so striking. The tableau effect was heightened by the use of 'triangles' in positioning the characters on stage, much like a renaissance artist's use of shape in composition.

As usual at the Coliseum, the chorus was super and really seemed to be enjoying themselves. Of the smaller parts, I liked Ava Dodd's Barbarina (one of the Count's conquests): her timing was spot on (saying to the Count immediately after he has unjustly accused the Countess "When you come to my room, I can still be your pussy cat...").

One marked improvement since my last visit was that the orchestra (conducted by Ainars Rubikis) was well balanced, not overpowering the singers. Rubikis also kept up a good tempo. The continuo was highlighted by the conductor at the final curtain, and his harpsichord is integral to keeping the dialogue (and thereby the plot) going between arias. Highlighting contemporary relevance, I was advised that the cast were dressed in this season's colours (I confess I would not have got there unaided).

One of the benefits of visiting ENO is that it sings in English, thereby increasing accessibility, albeit the near universal

use of surtitles makes this less of an issue than it once was. That said, I found myself laughing at Jeremy Sams' translation of the libretto, which was light years away from the one in use when I first saw 'The Marriage of Figaro' at ENO over 40 years ago (I recall the late Sir Geraint Evans singing 'here's an end to the gay life' when Figaro is contemplating marriage, whereas Sams neatly rhymed 'no more rover' and 'Casanova' for the same sentiment).

This was an enjoyable production of a well known and well loved classic opera. Perhaps the last word should go to my first time opera going cousin "the time went so quickly and I was really sorry when it finished, I wanted it to carry on". Which surely means the visit was a success.

T.J.N. WICKENS

A Poet's Abusive Muse



Gwyneth Lewis, *Nightshade Mother: A Disentangling* (Calon Books, 2024)

In *Nightshade Mother*, Gwyneth Lewis revisits her childhood from an adult perspective, forensically exploring her mother's abusive behaviour and her father's complicity in it. She teases out the many ways it continues to impact on her life, from debilitating migraine attacks to her inability to credit her own experience. Her mother's behaviour is shown to be extraordinary in all senses of the word. It not only manifests in the relatively familiar forms of favouritism, dismissiveness, unpredictable but all too frequent outbursts of rage, and moral blackmail, but also in an infinitely more peculiar way. From childhood, Gwyneth showed strong promise as a poet, and her mother Eryl – an English teacher – quickly escalates from correcting and 'improving' her poems to composing a substantial part of them herself. Worse, she does so not just in private, but in the very public domain of the *eisteddfod*, the annual Welsh-language competition in the arts; Gwyneth is repeatedly and intensely ashamed of winning

trophies for the resulting work. Ultimately, Eryl goes so far as to submit work that Gwyneth had no part in: a mother quite literally usurping her own daughter's mother tongue.

In a self-authorising move that speaks to a continuing lack of confidence in her own voice, Lewis quotes extensively from her childhood diaries as well as from her parents' letters to her in support of her new understanding of events. Despite this, and despite her harrowingly clear recall of the details of a suppression that lasted from early childhood until she left home at nineteen, the moment that most clearly crystallises the level of abuse is when Lewis's boyfriend overhears her side of a phone conversation with her parents in which they blackmail her into returning to live with them. He responds by vomiting.

Unsurprisingly, it is apparent throughout the book that – despite her need and determination to do so – Lewis can hardly bring herself to write it. Her difficulty in articulating the story is one of the most revealing signs of damage; tellingly, the most direct attacks on her parents are in the voice of one of her childhood toys, the glove puppet Mwnci. Nonetheless, she is scrupulous in presenting her mother as a real person, a brilliant and beloved teacher who was herself damaged by a difficult relationship with her own mother; she writes movingly not just of living in constant fear of provoking Eryl's rage and contempt, but also of uncomplicated and joyful moments that they shared. The nightshade metaphor of the title embodies this paradox; Eryl, like the *atropa belladonna* that was one of the many plants they studied together, is both compellingly attractive and deadly. The resulting fusion of love and trauma is tellingly revealed when Lewis writes of dreaming that Eryl comes to the launch of *Nightshade Mother*, and how her own immediate response is 'how can I make this all right for her?' A similar impulse characterises the book itself. Even as she ferociously fights to be heard, the book offers a generosity of understanding that she herself spectacularly failed to receive.

JANE GRIFFITHS

Spider Mother

In that top corner, my torch picks out
the eight red eyes of one cunning spider,

wedged like a camera in its nest of wires.
I am the mote in each eye. Her gazes

trap me, like weighted nets
which have floored me more times

than I care to admit. Once I'm felled,
down she abseils and crawls

tickling, inside my ear, to lay eggs
into my brain. Those cells adjust

to their guest with seasons of migraine
through which I rest, until she emerges,

triumphant, through the arch of my mouth,
clad in chainmail of living armour:

glittering spiderlings, hatched from my mind –
if that can be called my own now, or home.

Spidering

Now for the mind-blinding fall
through thin air, the hissing spool
of silk high above me, a rope
that could hang me. I've anchored my web,

so pay out a loop, repeat, to form
a billowing compass rose
then listen, intently through outspread feet
for something to fall. Queen Jezebel

was flung by eunuchs from the palace window
onto the flagstones below, trampled
by horses, dog-savaged, till all that was left
were her palms, soles and skull.

Next I perceive the queen's physical rhyme:
a run-over vole on a lane, left pawpads
still perfect, held up in vain to deflect the tyre,
her torso crushed to a hand-pressed flower

of fur, exquisite. Then, something between
the two, I haul myself in. I neither survived
King Jehu's triumph nor the juggernaut wheel but –
don't ask me how, I'm still feeling, pulling.

GWYNETH LEWIS

Maze

First, locate your original wound.
I come to in the bathroom, a body beside
me. Did we? Could I have? Check between legs
for dampness. Next, torso. Is this
my own blood? If not, then whose?

Tied to my hand is a thread of scarlet,
an electric cable zinging. Lose it, I die. So I follow
its pull through this house and its generations,
a crazed enfilade of dead ends, cluttered box rooms
while outside– huge thud, a gull

flies into a window. The bird is shattered
in three: the flesh slides down but its shadow
veers off at an angle, climbs, clicking sun's shutter
right in my face, the third is a burglar alarm
wailing, 'Emergency!'. Which one should I follow?

Gwyneth Lewis was Wales's National Poet from 2005 to 2006. Her first six books of poetry in Welsh and English were followed by *Chaotic Angels* (2005) from Bloodaxe, which brings together the poems from her three previous English collections, and by *A Hospital Odyssey* (2010), and *Sparrow Tree* (2011), winner of the Roland Mathias Poetry Award (Wales Book of the Year) in 2012. Her most recent books are *Nightshade Mother: A Disentangling* (2024) and *First Rain in Paradise* (2024), from which these three poems are taken; *Oxford Magazine* is grateful to Bloodaxe Books for permission to print them here. Gwyneth received an MBE in 2022.

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